

WAMM Media Watch

A COMMITTEE OF WOMEN AGAINST MILITARY MADNESS

3255 Hennepin Avenue South / Minneapolis, Minnesota 55408 / (612) 827-5364

RECEIVED

DEC 19 1991

Federal Communications Commission
Office of the Secretary

December 17, 1991

ORIGINAL
FILE

To: Donna R. Searcy, Secretary Federal Communications Commission

The Federal Communications Commission
1919 M. St. N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20554

RE: MM Docket # 91-221

The subject of this letter is our response to the comments made by the Office of Communications of the United Church of Christ in regard to the F.C.C. Review of the Policy Implications of the Marketplace.

Women Against Military Madness (W.A.M.M.) is a Peace and Justice multi-issue organization with a membership of 3000 or more people. It is a branch of the statewide Minnesota Peace and Justice Coalition. W.A.M.M./ Media Watch is a subdivision of W.A.M.M. which has been monitoring the newspapers and electronic media for three years to see how W.A.M.M.'s concerns and other issues being confronted by the community of Peace and Justice organizations are being treated.

Leary P. Shepard

Co-ordinator, WAMM/MEDIA WATCH

WAMM Media Watch

A COMMITTEE OF WOMEN AGAINST MILITARY MADNESS

3255 Hennepin Avenue South / Minneapolis, Minnesota 55408 / (612) 827-5364

Page 1

REPLY COMMENTS

In the matter of the Review of the Policy Implications of the Changing Video Marketplace. MM Docket #91-221

I

THE SHRINKING NUMBER OF SEPARATELY OWNED ELECTRONIC AND PRINT MEDIA OUTLETS SEVERELY LIMITS PUBLIC DIALOGUE. A RELAXATION OF GROUP OWNERSHIP RULES WOULD CONTRIBUTE TO THIS PROBLEM.

There is statement on pages 15 and 16 of the Comments of the United Church of Christ which we heartily endorse. " In considering whether to relax the group ownership rule, the Commission must not limit its analysis to the number of media outlets. What is important is the number of separately owned media." Additionally we believe the shrinking number of OWNERS of the electronic and print media not only affects the variety of entertainment, it severely limits the access to public dialogue by the citizenry.

Here, at the grass roots level, there is increasing anger over our inability to acquire access to any form of media-outlet. To buy a station or even publish a newspaper is beyond the means of most citizens. Broadcasting either by

Page 2

radio or television is now the standard way to exercise our first amendment rights. It seems to have been forgotten that the airwaves belong to us and we have only rented them to the station owners. The old-fashioned market place where views were traditionally exchanged, is long gone. Most "public" places have been privatized by shopping mall owners who are the same corporate entities as the advertisers who are now controlling our air space. Even leafletting is severely restricted in them. The ability of ordinary citizens to present their views to policy makers is constantly blocked by the media owners and their gatekeepers, the editors and news managers. It is extremely difficult to wrest time and space from them in order to communicate important information from citizen to government administrators or from citizen to citizen. This is especially true when the information runs counter to assumptions which corporate media owners want to have accepted as "given". Crucial economic and political policy decisions are being made without any debate. Information which the policy-makers need for policy decisions never reach the boardrooms.

Station owners and newspaper publishers depend almost entirely on advertising revenue for their operating expenses. The influence of these advertisers, regardless of how much the owners deny it, is transparent. That influence governs

page 3

the way issues are framed as they are presented on news programs. It also sets the news agenda, dictating what is, or is not, newsworthy. In fact, the advertisers are really the clients of the stations and news organs. The role of the listening and reading public is to remain attentive to what is offered long enough to be exposed to the influence of the commercials. As this is increasingly understood, it should not be surprising that the public is less and less willing to be so used.

II

THE LACK OF DIVERSITY IN THE MINNESOTA MARKET HAS BEEN RECENTLY DEMONSTRATED BY THE TREMENDOUS CONTROL EXERTED BY ONE POWERFUL ADVERTISING CLIENT.

The Minnesota Public Utilities Commission (P.U.C.) has been holding hearings this last month as they decide whether to allow Northern States Power (N.S.P.), our monopoly utility company, to store nuclear wastes outside its nuclear plant on Prairie Island in the Mississippi River. Prairie Island is the home of a Sioux tribe. This tribe has been aware of, and alarmed by, the plan and has tried to alert other Minnesotans to this controversial proposal. This issue, course, has the most immediate effect on their health and welfare but it is a potential danger to any one living downstream from the plant and anyone expecting to use the

page 4

Mississippi River waters. The outcome will have national precedent-setting implications and yet, due to lack of publicity, very few Minnesotans, much less Iowans and Wisconsin citizens, know of the impending decision. You would have to have scanned the print press daily to find out when and where the series of hearings were being held.

The electronic media has been almost silent. The Sierra Club tried to hold a series of sessions of their own around the state to alert the general public but, with no funds to publicize their hearings, they failed to get enough attendance to justify the effort.

The final and decisive P.U.C. hearing took place on December 16th at the State Capitol. In desperation, the tribe had hired a commercial advertising firm to help them craft an informational ad with what, they believed, was an extremely restrained statement giving the facts and the time and place of the hearing. Through the advertising agency they tried to buy 30 seconds' time on all the four major stations; WCCO (CBS), KSTP (ABC), KARE (NBC) and KITN (FOX). They intended to unveil this ad at a press conference, thus maximizing the distribution of the information. Even before the press conference began, Northern States Power was informed of the impending event and persuaded the

page 5

three network stations to refuse to run the ad. A day later KITN also withdrew but, after a delay and a revision, they finally aired it just prior to the hearing. The excuse used by all of them was that their station's policy was not to run "issues" ads except during elections. Aside from this cavalier denial of the rights of the tribe to free speech, this leaves station owners as sole arbiters of what constitutes as "issue".

We must also wonder how they decide when the election process begins. In regard to the "issue" question, these stations accept, without question, beer ads which, in themselves, are controversial. In the body of the text of the ad was a statement that the utility company wanted to keep the information quiet. Some stations objected to this assertion although, by that time, it certainly seemed a reasonable one because N.S.P. had made no effort to publicize the hearings themselves. But, in any case, the tribe felt the station had no right to edit their text and, in the end, the statement was proved correct. The story of the placement of nuclear wastes in the flood plain of the Mississippi River and the hazard this presents to the environment was one which should have been the subject of the major news report. But even on the day of the hearing, December 16th, there was no mention of the story on any of the

page 6

four stations.

Actually, an advertisement would not have been necessary had the media performed in a responsible way. But the public is at the mercy of private powers which are unaccountable to us, regarding the use of the limited airwaves. These powers determine what we shall and shall not be told, what entertainment we can or cannot have. Decisions are made on the basis of what will attract the most consumers of the products advertised rather than on the merits or popularity of the offerings. There have been similar incidents regarding paid ads but more often the censoring is done by the omission of important facts in a news story or even omitting stories altogether. In such cases we are told that there is only so much time between commercials in broadcasts or so much space in newspapers, and editors and news managers must select the items that interest the public. It is no accident that items which don't impact well on the reputations or bottom lines of the advertisers are seldom, in their opinion, "of interest". But with so little diversity in offerings, how can anyone know what the public might want?

There is an astonishing uniformity to all the stories that are presented, which is parallel to the uniformity of the

Page 7

names of the list of advertisers which fund the newspapers and broadcasts. There is also uniformity of individuals and organizations which are presented as credible news sources. Debates are framed by these "experts" in such a way that we are asked to assume that there are only two sides to a question when there are often many other alternatives which are superior to either of the choices we are asked to consider. And there is uniformity in the unexamined assumptions which have been implanted in the public discourse, assumptions which usually serve the interests of the wealthy and powerful corporate advertisers.

Even the F.C.C. Review of Policy contains assumptions which we know, from bitter experience, are not true. For instance, behind the question on page 3 section 3 there is an assumption that there really is an increased competition in "viewing choices" because of the increase in stations. This ignores the fact that most people can't afford Cable. It also begs the question of how citizens can find a way to air alternative new ideas. But as the Office of Communication of the United Church of Christ has said in its commentary, the proliferation of stations is meaningless when they are all owned by similar corporate entities, dependent for their profits on the same advertisers. Ben Bagdikian's Media Monopoly, which U.C.C. cites, is only one of dozens

page 8

of well researched scholarly books which have been written about the plight of the news consumer as the sources have shrunk.

Cable companies such as Continental Cable in St. Paul who promised public access and technological help in return for being granted the monopoly ownership of our local system, have not honored their promises. They, too, are economically dependent on pleasing advertisers. Public T.V. and Public Radio have been captured by the same interests. On their stations, what is euphemistically called "underwriting" is characterized, by local commercial broadcasters here, as tax-deductible advertising. These commercial broadcasters complain that their own non-tax deductible advertising space must compete with that of the tax deductible public station for the some advertising dollars. Norman Solomon, co-author of Unreliable Sources has described the choice of media fare (and he includes magazines and popular books) as similar to a shelf of cigarette packages. They come in different colors and shapes but, if you look carefully, you will see they all are manufactured by a handful of corporate conglomerates and there is little or no substantive difference between the brands.

There is a reason why street demonstrations and other forms

Page 9

of direct expression are increasing. There's a reason why there is a sudden proliferation of media consultancies as grass roots organizations and individuals try to obtain access to airwaves. There's a reason why people are turning off their television sets and it is not because of the proliferation of stations. Too many people have felt manipulated and deceived by what purports to be our information systems and they are angry because they have no chance to talk back.

III

THE F.C.C. APPEARS TO BE IGNORING CITIZEN COMPLAINTS

I hope this letter will have better treatment than my last communication to you. Along with several other petitioners last year we challenged the license application by a local public broadcast owner. William Kling, President of Minnesota Public Radio, already had two stations, KNOW-AM and FM, and wanted to buy a third, WLOL-FM. There were many reasons why he should not have been considered qualified, which I outlined. I never even received an acknowledgement that my complaint had been received. I then sent a supplement to the original challenge with quite a lot of documentation attached and had it delivered to you by the staff of my congressman Bruce Vento. I still received no acknowledgement. After the license was approved, which was on the

page 9

first day possible (suggesting there had been no debate or investigation as Mr. Kling had confidently told us would be the case). I asked some media lawyers in Washington to check for me to see if my protest had ever been filed. Only three (as I remember) of the challenges had been filed and mine was not one of them. Since then, Mr. Kling, who had managed to get a low interest loan from the city for the station purchase, announced he had sold KNOW-AM to a Texas firm which has no history in broadcasting. No one knew what this firm intended to do with the station or the very valuable piece of property which goes with its tower and they refused to return calls of inquiry. Just recently we were informed by a newspaper reporter that the deal had fallen through and KNOW-AM is again for sale. So much for local control of our media in St. Paul!

Yours truly,

Mary R. Shepard

Mary R. Shepard, co-ordinator W.A.M.M./Media Watch

c.c. Counsel for the Office of Communication
United Church of Christ

December 17, 1991